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ABSTRACT

While educational institutions in rural America present unique characteristics and offer opportunities for administrative excellence, educators have tended to overlook rural resources and the possibility of implementing educational programs in community life, which in turn, would reflect the heritage of rural culture and values. This paper suggests some solutions for rural post-secondary educators. It looks at the current academic uncertainty, with focus on declining enrollments, regulations, and reduced budgets, and suggests that the main purpose of education includes real world application. The paper advocates experiences which relate individuals to community life, society's values, and broad social issues. Suggestions are provided concerning the implementation of one particular academic program - a cooperative education model being used in the State of Montana. The model provides students with an excellent educational experience in rural areas which allows them the opportunity to assimilate social values, get involved in community issues, relate theory to practice, and gain new relationships with their mentors. In addition, the program allows the professors the opportunity to become guides and facilitators of real learning experiences. (AH)

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IMPLICATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

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RURAL RENAISSANCE: IMPLICATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

ACADEMIC UNCERTAINTY

Academicians risk shared bias even with multiple expert opinions about higher education trends. In some cases agreement as a shared bias of a commonly held academic perspective restricts innovative approaches or new insights. In time administrators can validate future predictions as a corrective of a bias. By then, however, administrative adjustment comes too late. Evidently Cartter's long-range analysis of demographic factors affecting college enrollments represents such a case. A simple prediction about declining college enrollments went unnoticed by several prestigious educational organizations and most colleges and university administrators (1976:25-27). The picture in higher education has now become all too clear. For example, O'Keefe calls the last 30 years the "golden age" in higher education. From 1950-1980 enrollments in our universities and colleges spiralled from 2.3 million to 11 million students. In contrast with this five-fold increase drastic reductions in enrollments over the next 15-20 years in higher education prompted him to label this future period the "age of anxiety" (1982:15).

The 1980's represents uncertainty and pain, but the real danger of this era may also go unnoticed just as the earlier demographic predictions. Perhaps the recent Boyer and Hechinger (1981) prognosis on the short-sightedness of higher education has validity. With so much focus on enrollments, regulations, and reduced budgets, the main business of education receives little attention. Their suggested purpose of education also includes real world application.

> "The aim is not only to prepare the young for productive careers, but to enable them to live lives of dignity and purpose; not only to generate new knowledge but to channel that knowledge to humane ends; not merely to increase participation at the polls, but to shape a citzenry that can weigh decisions wisely and more effectively promote the public good" (1981.60).

In conclusion, these educators advocate experiences which relate individuals to community life, society's values, and broad social issues.

In an excellent essay about professional educators Morrill and Spees predict drastic changes and needed reform in the relationship between faculty and student. They view faculty as role models, facilitators, and coordinators. With so much data readily available, the traditional role of faculty as conveyors of information becomes more obsolete with time (1982:294). Consequently, they suggest, along with Boyer and Hechinger, that educational reforms over-lap current social needs.

In periods of transition such as ours administrators need a clear vision about educational purposes. In addition, even in times of austerity innovation should not be abandoned. The level of anxiety for administrators rises in proportion to the complexity of pressing demands. How do academic administrators maintain or increase educational programs which relate to social needs without increasing budgets? How can academic administrators juxtapose the demand for educational services in needed areas of our society with ever increasing budgetary constraints? The purpose of this paper is to make specific suggestions on addressing needs in one neglected sector of our society. Educators have tended to overlook our rural resources and the possibility of implementing educational programs in community life which, in turn, relfect the heritage of our culture and values.

RURAL RENAISSANCE

In the 1980's both rural population and enrollments at post-secondary institutions continue to evidence signs of life and vitality. This interest in education at rural institutions coincides with a larger concern about balanced growth in America's educational system. As pointed out by Sher (1978), the exact origins of the renewed interest in rural education is unclear, but seems at least partly to flow from ". . . . a new appreciation of cultural pluralism, skepticism about the quality and efficacy of large schools and urban models of education, and the irony of 'progressive' urban and suburban school systems embracing traditional rural practices (e.g. individualized instruction, cross-age grouping and peer teaching)."

While college enrollments decline overall, rural institutions break this trend on an unprecedented scale. In Montana, for example, this fourth largest geographical state contains largely a rural population of 800,000. All campuses in the university system experienced balanced growth throughout the past decade. Moreover, all of these institutions drew students essentially into a rural environment.

The same pattern has occurred throughout America. Sociological studies have documented the shifting of the American population from urban to rural areas. From 1970 to 1982 an unprecedented 4½ million people moved into rural areas. During this same period over 2,500 rural counties gained significant population. The previous trend since World War II has been reversed in the late 1970's. Until then all growth in the U.S. occurred in the city. Now the rural areas increase at a 4.2% rate compared to 2.9 in the cities. The impact on local rural communities, educational systems and economic life has produced interesting results. People moving into

these areas expect the same services in education, clinics, roads and hospitals as in their former cities. Moreover, these people do not have the same conservative political philosophy as their neighbors. They actively seek assistance from outside institutions, by directly lobbying for assistance. Thus new rural residents compete with the old guard for local dominance. In addition, academic programs not only experience a more heterogeneous faculty group, but also must work with a more heterogeneous business and community base. The origins of rural institutions, developed from people who desired a practically-oriented, applied form of higher education unique to local circumstances. Indeed, the Morrill Act of 1862 specifically sought this form of education for land-grant universities. In contrast smaller institutions evolved as "charitable institutions, extending credit, taking in kind gifts instead of tuition, and providing jobs for poor students" (West, 1932:41). The rationale for involvement and participation in academic programs varies widely in this environment. Administrators must spend the time necessary identifying critical motivating factors.

Growth in rural post-secondary institutions reaffirms educational pluralism even if it creates considerable difficulty for academic administrators operating in the rural environment. Rural administrators must adjust to an appropriate environmental style. Professional meetings and educational training has typically focused on designing programs, planning change and implementing evaluation systems. Little emphasis has been given to the rural administrator in spite of the fact that rural institutions have unique heritages.

UNIQUE CHARACTERISTICS

Rural institutions do in fact possess unique characteristics which directly impact decision-making, change and implementation of new programs. Among these unique characteristics are: an interesting balance between stability and change, geographic dispersion of rural institutions and concern about federal programs. Discussion of these characteristics follows:

Stability and Change. Rural institutions continue to serve clients in a congenial, small scale, learning-centered and teaching-oriented manner. To a lesser extent some also preserve certain religious traditions and ethnic heritages. Thus they maintain the cultural and social pluralisms of our nation.

Not coincidentally, the old-guard faculty of rural institutions chose to practice their profession in this environment. It reflects the traditional and distinctly rural values. Conflict has developed in rural academia similarly to the new rural residents already discussed. Over the past decade old guard faculty members advocating a rural ethnic philosophy have struggled with new guard faculty members with progressive ideas about decision-making and academic standards. The new guard emphasizes publishing, presentation of professional papers and greater professional involvement. Administrators recognize the magnitude of these conflicts. Faculty conflicts over long-held traditions, ethnic philosophies and professionalism disrupt collegiality and university programming.

For instance, any administrator who initiates novel programs must also deal with the old guard, defensive faculty and the new guard faculty members who question whether it upgrades academic standards in their respective disciplines.

Since any different program or activity represents change, it is challenged. Therefore change at a stable, traditional higher education institution becomes an even slower and more painstaking process. Consequently the academic planner should evaluate the institutional climate prior to initiating new programs. The evaluation process takes the following form:

1.) Identify representative decision-makers in each of the impact program areas. Oftentimes, this will not be the most vocal supporter or detractor. Question supporters: "Who do you feel it will be important to get involved in our discussions of this program redirection (ask both critics as well as other supporters)?" Soon a pattern will begin to emerge; certain names will emerge more and more frequently.

2.) Decide on a strategy or several strategies. Should one go after the top decision-maker or arm subordinates with information so that they can convince him/her? Will there be a different strategy, for each of the areas where one wishes to initiate, implement or expand a particular academic program? The importance of a strategy, worked on by staff members and/or interested parties cannot be overemphasized. Like a road map strategy guides actions and provides direction for those working in rural institutions.

3.) Become the one expert on campus who can professionally and academically address the proposed change. Hard data, case studies, facts, figures and statistics help sell a program. Using Montana State University as a case study may help underscore this point. As an academic administrator

at MSU the first author's title includes that of Director of Cooperative Education. Cooperative Education represents an academic program at MSU, by offering a student a structured learning situation for which he/she can receive credit, a grade, and supervision by a faculty member in the student's major area. Program acceptance came through informational meetings with key administrators and faculty. These meetings focused on case studies at similar institutions and academic fields which validated educational merit of the co-op programs. Since the prestigious Carnegie Higher Education Commission report in 1971 criticized education in a vacuum, co-op was addressed as an ideal academic program to counter such criticism particularly since it was cost-effective for institutions of higher education, demonstrated specific benefits for all parties and increased retention for depressed discipline areas. Faculty members usually responded favorably.

4.) Plan information in a logical, orderly and stepped fashion. Most faculty think in a logical and orderly fashion. Thus the information presented followed an orderly and logical step similar to a professor's lecture. Visual aids and note pads helped. Remember, however, to give information in proportion to interest and need.

5.) Proceed slowly in rural institutions where organizational climate dictates. Rapid change in rural institutions could spell disaster. Administrative endorsement should be matched by faculty support to ensure long-term success. In this regard it helps to conduct research and document program operations, especially if well-planned academic programs produce results. A pre- and post- survey impact on students, faculty and other groups also provides base line data for follow-up studies.

Geographic Dispersion of Rural Institutions. States with rural institutions offering similar Co-op academic programs vary widely in the geographic dispersion of these programs. Montana has five rural institutions offering Co-op in a 145,000 square mile area. Vermont has five Co-op programs covering 30,000 square miles. Furthermore, while rural governments comprise 70% of all governments with a jurisdiction encompassing 30% of the U.S. population, several critical factors remain. Forty-one percent of the nation's poor live in rural areas while 57% do not own a car. To make matters worse, 89% of all rural local governments have less than 50 employees. Rural programs represent, then, unique challenges in a unique environment. While both offer rural Co-op programs, the program demands vary.

Wide geographic dispersion also impacts employer development, student supervision and job-site evaluation. Employer development becomes expensive and requires much coordination with geographic dispersion. Keeping the Co-op program before the employer public also requires periodic attention. For example, at MSU and employer-oriented Sales and Marketing Newsletter works well as a quarterly newsletter. It includes articles of business concern for rurally isolated communities. On the other hand, the Cooperative Education Newsletter highlights program successes for students, faculty, administrators and employers. Both of these instruments serve the purpose of keeping the academic program periodically before the interested publics of the program. In the area of student supervision, the coordinator in Western and Southern states, who periodically visits widely-dispersed job placement sites must either travel great distances or communicate with students. Rural directors agree that their visitations cost time and money. Similarly, placement for students presents a problem; however it helps if employers come on campus.

In addition to the internal program operations described above there also exist special academic problems. First, Co-op directors/coordinators periodically exchange ideas, problems and challenges. Oftentimes directors within the state must wisely schedule meetings in order to logistically bring everyone together. Second, the infrequency of meetings often translates into a lack of unanimity and forcefulness on any given issue. Thus in rural regions significant input to policies is more difficult.

Concern About Federal Programs. In 1980 the Department of Education sponsored a series of workshops in ten rural communities throughout the United States and discovered a strong bias in rural America in the area of federal funds: (Herriott, 1980). This bias is not without foundation: most federal programs match urban educational institutions better. Often the regulations slant toward the cities and preclude even an application form rural schools or universities. The second author of this paper found, in a study of urban schools, that there is a difference in teacher's attitude toward students who were from rural areas compared to those from urban areas (Hynson: 1979, 49-58). Certainly these practices impact on rural academic programs. Even if money becomes available academic administrators must be sensitive to politically conservative attitudes of rural residents who want no federal money. Oftentimes, rural residents fail to realize that the tax base came from them. Thus administrators from the Rural Experimental Schools Program found that programming ran counter to community values. The training of professionals (students placed in rural businesses by an academic co-op administrator) takes on new dimensions with these restraints.

Politics also works in the opposite direction. Most small governments do not know how to write grants or how to compete with urban institutions. One example will suffice: Even though 40% of all qualified applicants for HUD programs live in areas with less than 5,000 people, only 22% of the grant applicants received funding.

Ehly (1938:12) discovered that professionals often hold self-imposed barriers in moving from urban to rural areas. He discovered that when mental health specialists were moved from urban areas to rural areas they continued operating as though they were still in an urban area. They in effect disrupted rural norms and mores and therefore were not effective. Ehly's case was for an intermediate step, an in-house residency, if you will, that would give the newly relocated urbanite an opportunity to adjust and adapt to rural community mores and values.

In rural educational settings, there is a tremendous need for services, as alluded to above. Meanwhile, rural higher educational institutions sit in the midst of this need with a source of highly trained paraprofessionals who are increasingly desiring a blending of educational theory and practice. Now it is conceivable that academic administrators sitting in the morass of competition for monies as enrollment continues declining, could lose sight of the real purpose of education. At rural institutions this mission is defined as a blending of the liberal arts and applied learning. In fact, the justification for funding such institutions is oftentimes their "investment in meeting needs" at the state level.

At Montana State University the experiment of the past several years with one academic program--co-op ed--is proving that all parties in the rural environment can be winners. By blending theory with practice, the classroom becomes larger than its four walls. Students learn by doing, thereby receiving a relevant education, and an opportunity to adjust to rural community patterns and mores. Faculty become more than a disseminator of information; they become learning facilitators, thereby fundamentally altering the faculty-student relationship, which Morrill & Spees called for in the aforementioned

article. The rural community, so desperately in need of services, receives top-flight paraprofessional help.

Higher education is sometimes like the amateur photographer who takes his camera out, begins taking pictures but doesn't focus it properly. The focus clearly needs to be on the purpose of education. The challenge represented today is to be problem solvers in a complex and needy world.

SUMMARY

In the midst of change and confusion, administrators need to be careful not to neglect the obvious question in higher education: What is our purpose? This paper has suggested some solutions for rural post-secondary educators. Educational institutions in rural America represent unique characteristics and indeed offer opportunities for administrative excellence. With the rural renaissance occurring administrators have been responsive to this new thrust into rural community life. Suggestions were made about how to implement one particular academic program--a cooperative education model. Furthermore, it has also been argued that the greatest need exists in the rural environment while at the same time, the least effort has been given. Finally it was suggested that students receive an excellent educational experience in the co-op program in rural areas. After all the best solution is to find real world experience for students. In the rural environment they have an opportunity to assimilate social values, get involved in community issues, relate theory to practice, and gain new relationships with their mentors. When this occurs professors are no longer discriminators of information but guides and facilitators of real learning experiences. Thus all parties in higher education come out winners.

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